

UK unions and Labour Party agree partnership ahead of general election

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It took just a few hours of talks on Tuesday for the Labour Party and its affiliated trade unions to seal an agreement to work as government partners, following its expected victory in a general election later this year.

The meeting over the content of Labour's "New Deal for Working People", which will form part of its manifesto, was billed by the media as a "showdown" between union leaders and Labour's leadership. It was rather a meeting in which the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy prepared jointly for a showdown with the working class.

The meeting was organised via TULO (Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation), set up by Tony Blair on taking the Labour leadership in 1994. TULO includes the leaders of the 11 trade unions affiliated to Labour, including the two largest unions, Unite and Unison. Among the union leaders attending were Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, Fire Brigades Union (FBU) General Secretary Matt Wrack and Communication Workers Union (CWU) leader Dave Ward.

Labour's team included party leader Sir Keir Starmer, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves, deputy leader, Angela Rayner, party chair, Shadow Business secretary Jonathan Reynolds, and the Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury Darren Jones.

The meeting ended with a joint statement proclaiming collaboration, not conflict: "Labour and the affiliated unions had a constructive discussion today. Together we have reiterated Labour's full commitment to the 'New deal for working people' as agreed in July. We will continue to work together at pace on how a Labour government would implement it in legislation."

A further meeting to agree final wording of the deal is scheduled in three weeks.

The key aim of the union leaders is to pre-empt

opposition to Labour's right wing pro-business agenda by falsely presenting themselves as the champions of embattled workers fighting the Sunak government, who will now turn to holding Labour to account in office.

Many workers are already repulsed by the right-wing agenda of Starmer, above all his staunch backing of Israel's genocide of the Palestinians which provoked a major protest vote in the recent local elections, especially in Muslim and student constituencies. And presenting Labour as a pro-worker alternative to the Tories was made yet more difficult by Starmer's unilateral repudiation of the supposed commitments to workers' rights they agreed to last summer.

Measures that had been proposed by Rayner included ending zero-hours contracts, ending companies being able to carry out "fire and rehire" operations and repealing some of the anti-strike legislation put on the statute book by the Tories since 2016. But on May Day, no less, a report in the *Financial Times* made clear that ministers were in discussions with business leaders to "water down" anything that they found unacceptable.

The FT noted that since 2021, "behind the scenes, shadow ministers have been discussing how to tone down some of the pledges to ease employer misgivings as the party tries to boost its pro-business credentials ... One business leader said that after several meetings with the party, they were now 'pretty relaxed' about its plans."

The FT cited the ban on zero hour contracts, fire-and-rehire and workers enjoying full employment protections on "day one" of a new job as having been abandoned, with Labour only pledged to start a "legislative process" within 100 days of taking office based on what was described as "draft legislative proposals" yet to be published.

Any ban on fire-and-rehire contracts must allow

businesses to “restructure to remain viable and preserve their workforce when there is genuinely no alternative.”

Graham, speaking on behalf of a politically exposed bureaucracy, pontificated about a “red line” not to be crossed. “Choosing May Day to give notice of watering down your promise to overhaul one of the worst sets of employment rights in Europe is beyond irony,” she stated.

In a May 8 press release she even threw in her ritual threat to withdraw funding from Unite to Labour, under conditions where “We’ve got £29 million in our political fund.”

Wrack, this year’s TUC president, added, “If there is any more rolling back on the new deal, they can expect a hostile reaction.”

The reality is that the central pre-occupation of Starmer, and Reeves has been to assure big business that they will be able—working in a corporatist set-up with the unions—to pile up even more profits. The FT noted in May last year that in his first three years as party leader Starmer and Reeves had met over 1,000 “business leaders”—roughly three every two working days.

Graham’s grandstanding naturally came to nought. By the end of Tuesday’s meeting it was only high praise for Starmer. Posting on X, she said, “The workers’ voice was heard today. My Job is to defend workers. UK Labour have listened.”

Similarly effusive was Wrack, a former member of the pseudo-left Socialist Party. He told *Times Radio*, “We had a very good meeting today... We’re in a very good position to present something to the electorate that will, I think, win votes for Labour.”

With the FT reporting that “one union figure said the Labour leadership had been ‘forced to retreat’ in several areas”, the voice of British business still noted pointedly, “Neither Labour nor the union leaders set out any concrete concessions made by the party on Tuesday.”

Shadow Chancellor Reeves boasts that Starmer and herself will head “the most pro-business government in history”. She spelled out the actual function of the workers’ rights agenda championed by the Trades Union Congress when speaking at the Mais Lecture in March. Held at the Bayes Business School in the capital, the lecture is described “as the City of London’s foremost event for the banking and finance

community.”

Speaking of why Labour wants to remove some of the anti-strike legislation brought in the Tories, she explained, “We will reverse changes since 2010 that have done nothing to prevent the worst period of disruption since the 1980s, but instead have contributed to a conflictual, scorched-earth approach that has stood in the way of productive negotiation. These policies didn’t exist under Blair and Brown when there were fewer strikes and less disruption. We will work with business as we deliver and implement these policies.”

Whatever “deal” is eventually announced in June, Labour is set for a head-on collision with the working class in which the trade unions will function as an industrial police force.

The unions have already made this clear. Over the course of 2022-23, a strike wave through the most critical sectors of the economy, involving two million workers—with the potential to bring down the Tories—was systematically shut down by the trade union bureaucracy in a series of sell-out deals. This ensured that Starmer, who denounced the strikes and barred his shadow cabinet from attending picket lines, is ready to take office in a situation where Britain is largely a strike free zone. [LINK](#)

There are no exceptions to be found within the bureaucracy, whether on the notional “left” or “right”. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union is not affiliated to Labour and was not at this week’s crisis meeting. Its leader, Mick Lynch, earned an undeserved reputation as an opponent of big business and of Starmer’s most obvious betrayals, demanding of him, “Whose side are you on?”

But in the immediate aftermath of the rail strikes being sold out and the strike wave stemmed, he declared, “I support getting rid of this government and I’m a realist—the only government we’re going to get as an alternative will be led by Keir Starmer, so people have to deal with that, people have got to grow up a bit in some senses.”



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